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Helping the Singapore arts sector survive the Covid-19 crisis

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Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 23 April 2020

Headline: Helping the Singapore arts sector survive the Covid-19 crisis

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From online art classes to livestreaming performances and collective singing to cheer frontline healthcare workers, people across the globe are turning to the arts for much-needed connection and comfort amid the Covid-19 crisis.

Yet, the arts sector itself has been savagely hit by the pandemic because the work of artists is largely premised on dense physical contact and live experiences.

As part of the Government's Resilience Budget, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth has set aside a S\$55 million Arts and Culture Resilience Package. However, will this package be able to effectively ameliorate the calamitous impact of Covid-19 on the arts in Singapore?

With unprecedented venue closures and unforeseen cancellations of all live programming, coupled with future economic uncertainty, the most pressing challenge facing Singapore arts groups is solvency and their balance sheets.

They have to settle overheads and operating costs such as payrolls and rentals, while offsetting sunken costs incurred for deferred and cancelled projects, including fair compensation to contracted staff.

With no ticketing revenue and lost sponsorships, many arts organisations are likely to be facing a cash flow crisis due to their low working capital.

This is because a large number of them are not-for-profit companies reliant on government funding that encourages them to "professionalise" by developing organisational structures comprising salaried staff, and to keep producing to meet key performance indicators such as audience engagement.

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Mid-sized performing arts groups such as The Theatre Practice and T.H.E Dance Company that receive relatively less funding than state-run institutions are likely to be the most vulnerable.

This is because they are the least agile financially, with fixed running costs such as payrolls and stricken with the inability to continue with their normal day-to-day practices at the facilities they are paying to upkeep.

Yet, these arts organisations are the lifeblood that keep our arts ecosystem thriving. They create jobs for artistic, administrative and technical personnel, including freelancers, and support other small enterprises through their supply chains.

They are the creators and custodians of our intangible cultural heritage. They also placemake and rejuvenate our cityscape through their performances and activities.



Although the Resilience Package is much welcomed, it should ensure that it provides sufficient and expedient relief directly to those that are in critical condition. Admittedly the package includes useful measures such as the Jobs Support Scheme, though the level of support remains relatively lower than the provision for other sectors such as tourism.

Another component of the package is a new Digitalisation Fund to support artists' efforts to present their work in digital forms or via digital platforms during the Covid-19 crisis.

Although digitalisation can provide an exciting bridge to enable access to the arts, and a means to experiment with new forms of engaging and deepening relationships with audiences, this fund will not benefit many of the arts organisations directly.

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This is because digitalisation is not their core expertise and line of work, and they will hence lack the in-house resources and capabilities to digitalise their own content. This means they will need to channel a significant amount of any funding to outsource assistance from media and video production companies.

Additionally, with the bulk of the current online content being free, digitalisation does not seem to provide a sustainable business model that will allow arts organisations to make up for their current loss of revenue streams.

As arts institutions around the world are scrambling to roll out new digital platforms, livestreams and online viewing rooms, our arts organisations will be competing for attention in a saturated online sphere while trying to quickly upskill themselves and utilising archival content that may not be optimised for online viewing or both.

Importantly, we must recognise that digital engagement is merely a stopgap measure. It can never replace how the arts are live media that enable poignant and affective experiences.

Providing this free content for audiences to enjoy within the comforts for their homes may also set a problematic precedent. After this crisis, how will we encourage audiences to return to our arts venues and pay for content?

What would be valuable is an emergency relief funding package for the small-to-medium arts organisations identified by the National Arts Council as the “major companies that represent excellence in their core mission” in Singapore.

These companies should be able to activate the funds immediately to alleviate their fiscal stress, with minimal bureaucratic conditions. Ideally, this bailout should also cover projected shortfalls to tide them through the immediate future, as there is no guarantee that paying audiences and sponsorships will return after the pandemic is over given the probable economic slowdown in the near term.

A useful aid package is the €50 million funding (S\$77.7 million) provided by the German government. This includes grants to relieve urgent operational costs and overheads, as well as loans to help bridge financial bottlenecks. The funding is also extended to key commercial and support pillars of the arts ecosystem, including publishers.

The Arts Council England’s £160 million (S\$281.8 million) emergency funding is another example that prioritises solvency and longer-term sustainability. It has also amended the grant conditions for those currently in receipt of state funding, based on the understanding that it would be impossible for these arts groups to continue operations as per normal.

Having this assurance of financial health would offer Singapore arts organisations and their associated practitioners the opportunity for self-care, a much-needed breather from the endless cycle of producing and meeting key performance indicators, and/or a focus on their core function of making art.

It will also provide some breathing room to focus on capacity-building, resetting and preparing for a post-pandemic world where a recession and new health and safety guidelines will require much adjusting and restrategising.

There is no doubt that the arts will go on and artists will survive. After all, the arts are about risk, grit, resistance and adaptability. However, the Covid-19 pandemic will have a profound impact on the long-term viability and sustainability of Singapore’s arts ecosystem.

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Tough times call for unique measures — direct financial aid from the Government (as well as donations) is much needed to ensure that the nation's arts organisations will be able to weather the storm so that we do not run the risk of a drastically contracted and spiritually impoverished arts landscape as a dire post-pandemic scenario.

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